

Undergraduate Research in the Humanities – Embedded in the Curriculum

Katharine Kennedy, Charles A. Dana Professor of History and Assistant Dean for Special Projects
Agnes Scott College, Atlanta, Georgia

Background

Summary

Courses, and especially senior seminars, are the setting for most undergraduate research, past and present, in the humanities. Humanities faculty at Agnes Scott College are in the midst a project, supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, that asks not whether we should embed student research in the curriculum, but rather how we can make our curricula most conducive to successful student research. This poster

- situates Agnes Scott's ongoing project in a national context, in part by placing our model and outcomes on the continua of undergraduate research practices proposed by Beckman and Hensel (2009) and
- provides examples from our 2012 history seminar, including student responses to our emphasis on both product and process.

Our initiatives center on three areas: preparation, process, and product.

Humanities Research Within the Curriculum

National Contexts

- In the humanities, undergraduate research usually takes place during the academic year, as part of the student's academic load, and as part of the faculty member's teaching load. Senior seminars and independent senior theses are usual frameworks, and projects are usually student-initiated and faculty mentored.

Undergraduate research in the humanities at Agnes Scott College:
Curriculum Based ←X→ Co-curricular Fellowships

- Research is a crucial aspect of learning for undergraduate humanities students, although the approaches, settings, and funding needs tend to differ from those in the natural sciences. (Grobman, 2007; Klos et al, 2011)
- With the recent national interest in curriculum-based undergraduate research, the time is right for taking a close look at curriculum-based efforts in the humanities, and ways to strengthen them.

Local Contexts

- Agnes Scott is a small liberal arts college for women, with an enrollment of around 900 students. A student-faculty ratio of 11:1 ensures that faculty work with students individually.
- Most humanities majors require a senior research seminar, although there is no institutional requirement that every student complete a research project.



Inclusiveness of Undergraduate Research at Agnes Scott College:
All students ←X→ Honors students

- In the fall of 2011, Agnes Scott College received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the purpose of helping faculty in the humanities to develop and implement strategies for expanding and strengthening students' research opportunities. The work of the grant, which is still underway, consists primarily of course development, faculty workshops, and mentoring. Seventy-five per cent of the eligible full-time faculty are participating.

Benefits of embedding research in the curriculum

- Most students have access, and motivation.
- Faculty teach senior seminars and other research-intensive courses as part of their regular teaching load.
- In a class, students are part of a community of scholars with whom they collaborate and share experiences.
- Expenses for stipends and administrative costs are limited.

Evolving Goals of U R in the Humanities

- Competencies:** Develop skills in locating and evaluating information from multiple sources, evidence-based analysis, written and oral communication, critical reading and thinking. These skills or competencies, essential for successful research in the humanities, are also at the top of the list of learning outcomes desired by employers. (Hart Research Associates, 2013; Humphreys, 2013) In addition, students develop and demonstrate approaches specific to their disciplines.
- Capabilities:** Develop the sense of empowerment and agency that comes from making a problem one's own and addressing it thoroughly and persuasively. Promote "intensive participation in and ownership of knowledge" and "learning as a way of life" (Lozano, 2012, 7, 13.) – Learn to bring a large, complex project to completion. This includes overcoming obstacles and accepting criticism. Establish a disciplinary identity.
- We seek to make research stimulating, challenging, and meaningful for students who will pursue a variety of career paths. We know that only a small percentage of our graduates will pursue PhDs in the discipline of their major.

Research in Agnes Scott's senior seminar in history:
Student, process centered ←X→ Outcome, product centered
Student initiated ←X→ Faculty initiated

Students, in articulating their goals at the beginning of the history senior seminar, often referred both to product and process:

"One of my main goals for this project is to help dispel the romanticized image of the "Old South" by showing how difficult and bleak life really was for the majority of people living in the American South during the Civil War....I want to finish this course feeling competent and polished.... I aim to have a piece of work that shows how far I've come in these four years and that I can be proud of."

"I really hope for this paper to use the primary sources that I am looking at in a creative yet entirely relevant manner. I'm looking at discussions of citizenship for nurses in World War I through the lens of Harriet Stanton Blatch's Mobilizing Woman Power. Mentally, it is definitely my goal to not be overwhelmed by this paper and experience. Though I know it will be stressful at times, accomplishing this goal will rely on me staying on top of deadlines, asking for help when needed, and feeling confident in what I put to paper. My physical goal is simply to remain organized."

Strategies for strengthening UR in the humanities, with examples from the 2012 Senior Seminar in History

PREPARATION - How, over the course of the major, do we prepare students for senior-level research?

- Revise, rethink or introduce required methods courses, usually taken during the sophomore or junior year, with a central focus on teaching students both to undertake research in the major discipline, and to embrace it.

Comments from senior history majors on the methods course, History 290, "The Historical Imagination":

"290 taught me what it means to be a historian and how to ask the right questions."

"290 was essential for learning to write history."

"290 gave me so much experience researching."

- Curriculum mapping and revision, with the goal of sustaining research projects and training throughout the major.

- Pre-seminar mentoring. During the spring of the junior year prior to the senior seminar, each history major is assigned a faculty mentor and a librarian mentor. She meets with both several times during the spring and emails occasionally during the summer. The Mellon grant is providing small stipends to faculty to support this extra work.

Comments from history students about faculty mentors:

"She guided me through the whole process."

"My faculty mentor offered not only guidance and helpful suggestions but also a great deal of encouragement and support."

"My mentor was extremely helpful, supportive, and encouraging."

All 12 students in the seminar strongly agreed (9) or agreed (3) in response to the statement, "Having a faculty mentor was beneficial as I worked on my senior seminar paper."

PROCESS - How can we structure the process to promote high levels of engagement and learning at every stage? How can students best reflect on and learn from what is often an intense and intensive research experience?

All stages of the research incorporate opportunities for students to reflect on the process. These activities range from writing blog entries to structured conversations with peers, to taking photographs of themselves at work, etc.

Student reflections on working with other students in class:

"The class was great help and support."

"Student partner was very encouraging. Enjoyed sharing troubles and good finds."

"I had a great partnership. I think some students took criticism personally rather than seeing where their research might have needed work."

Self-Portraits of Students at Work:



PRODUCT - What are the expectations for students' final projects? Who is the audience for them?

The final products of the history senior seminar were a 20-25 page paper, a 20-30 minute presentation for classmates, mentors, and friends, and, for some students, presentation at the college's Spring Annual Research Conference, which took place after the semester ended. Several students expanded their projects into full-scale senior theses during the spring semester. One presented her work to a local historical society.

Campus/Community audience ←X→ Professional audience

Originality

The CUR definition of undergraduate research specifies that it "makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline." In our model of undergraduate research, conducted in a senior seminar, original research is a goal, but we realize that not every student will achieve it. A student whose final paper is not an original contribution to the discipline may be successful, however, in developing the desired competencies and capabilities. Of the twelve students in the 2012 history senior seminar, one could reasonably argue that eight produced scholarship original to the discipline.

Original to the student ←X→ Original to the discipline

What makes an undergraduate history student's research original?



Examine a significant topic about which there is virtually no existing scholarship:

Nadina Alvarado – "Catalan Nationalism in the Post-Franco Era: The Impact of TV3." Alvarado studied the founding, programming, and goals of the first Catalan-language television station. A high priority of the Catalan government, TV 3, established in 1983, has received very little scholarly attention.

Use untapped sources to challenge a prevailing perspective:

Anna Williams – "Yeoman Wives and the Struggle for Survival During the American Civil War." Williams used unpublished, unexamined letters exchanged by a Georgia couple during the civil war to contribute to our understanding of the wartime domestic economy for farming families of modest means, in contrast with the more widely studied planter class.



Use interviews to create new sources that can help to complete the historical record:

Maddy Mitchell – "The 'Good' Widow: Family Accomplishment, Female Breadwinners, and Motherhood in the Age of the Nuclear Family." Through her own family history, Mitchell became interested in American war widows after World War II. After discovering that there was very little scholarship on the subject, she conducted interviews and produced a case study that explores the plight of these widows in a postwar context that celebrated the nuclear family.

Consider sources through a new lens, to increase understanding of a subject:

Jessie Downs – "Abusing Maternity and Redefining Femininity: Perpetrators, Prisoners, and Collaborators in Chile, 1973-76." Downs used memoirs published by women, and a few men, imprisoned in Chile after the 1973 coup and explored the gender differentials in treatment of prisoners.



What did you learn in the senior seminar?

Students' responses to this question at the end of the history senior seminar:

- I have learned how to write something I can be very proud of and I have polished my research skills.*
- I have learned how to research and write a fairly long research paper in addition to keeping myself organized. In addition, I have learned how to space out work to manage other parts of my life!*
- I have learned how to engage with a topic and logically and cohesively express its significance.*
- More than anything, I have learned how to do serious, focused research in a way that is not possible in other classes.*
- How to give and receive criticism well, how to see flaws in my own methods, research.*
- I have learned about my own academic endurance, my capability of producing substantial research, and how important the Agnes Scott Community is in providing support and encouragement.*

Conclusion:

The first offering of the history senior seminar, in the revised format developed in the Mellon project, was largely successful in that most students developed a research question, found and used primary and secondary sources, formulated and supported a persuasive argument, and wrote a substantial paper. Students also learned to meet challenges, to persist toward their goals, to give and receive criticism, and to work with others. Our experiences are consistent with Carl Strikwerda's assertion that "The best way undergraduate research can be done is within a small capstone seminar." (Strikwerda, 2009, 3)

References

- Beckman, Mary and Nancy Hensel. "Making Explicit the Implicit: Defining Undergraduate Research." *CUR Quarterly* 29 (summer 2009): 40-44.
- Grobman, Laura. "Affirming the Independent Researcher Model: Undergraduate Research in the Humanities." *CUR Quarterly* 28(fall 2007): 23-27.
- Hart Research Associates. "It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success." Survey Conducted on Behalf of The Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2013.
- Debra Humphreys. "Success after College: What Students, Parents, and Educators Need to Know and Do." *Liberal Education* 99(spring 2013): 6-13.
- Naomi Yavneh Klos, Jenny Olin Shanahan, and Gregory Young, eds. *Creative Inquiry in the Arts & Humanities: Models of Undergraduate Research*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Undergraduate Research, 2011.
- Lozano, J. Felix, Alejandro Boni, Jordi Peris, and Andrés Huseo. "Competencies in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis from the Capabilities Approach." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 46(February 2012): 132-147.
- Strikwerda, Carl. "Everything We Teach Was Once Someone's Research: Creating a Culture of Discovery on Campus." *CUR Quarterly* 29(summer 2009): 1-5.

I would like to express my appreciation to the students in the 2012 history senior seminar at Agnes Scott College, and to Drew Homa of the Office of Faculty Services at Agnes Scott College.